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ABSTRACT

In its most basic form, storytelling is a process where a person (the teller), using vocalization, narrative structure, and mental imagery, communicates with the audience who also use mental imagery and, in turn, communicate back to the teller primarily through body language and facial expression in an ongoing communication cycle. Storytelling is co-creative and interactive. It is one of the most powerful forms of art/communication known to humans and this explains why it possesses such great potential as a teaching-learning tool. A fundamental curriculum goal is helping children grow into adults who participate actively and competently in the democratic process. For storytelling to be successful, teller and audience must collaborate to create the story, providing children with practice in several social skills, problem solving, exercise for the left and right brain hemispheres, and literacy development. Employing storytelling in the classroom on a regular basis is a sound teaching/learning strategy, because, as an art form and means of communication, it builds on children's preschool strengths and oral language expertise to help them successfully develop social, intellectual, and linguistic competencies. (CR)

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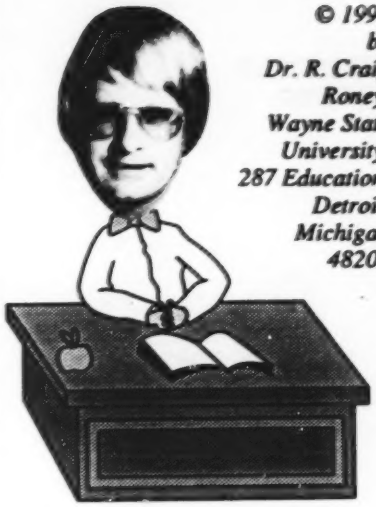
Storytelling in the Classroom: Some Theoretical Thoughts



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THE DECISION TO USE STORYTELLING in the K-12 classroom in an integral way is problematic. The common public perception is that storytelling is of little more use than as an entertaining diversion. Admittedly, both tellers and their audiences appear to enjoy themselves, and some learning theorists believe that humans learn best when they enjoy what they are learning. But what do children learn, if anything at all, during a storytelling experience? Little concrete learning appears to be taking place.

In truth, much learning does occur but because it is primarily cerebral, the learning isn't readily observable. Indeed the act of storytelling itself appears difficult to define because so much of what takes place in a storytelling session involves unobservable mental processing by both the teller and audience.

Yet the potential of storytelling as a viable teaching-learning tool can be recognized only if its inherent nature is clearly understood.

Storytelling Defined

In its most basic form, storytelling is a process where a person (the teller), using vocalization, narrative structure, and mental imagery communicates with other humans (the audience) who also use mental imagery and, in turn, communicate back to the teller primarily via body language and facial expression. The communication cycle is ongoing, and in the process a "story" is created. Diagramatically storytelling takes the following form:

As such, storytelling is both an art form and a means of communication. As art, storytelling involves creativity. But the creativity is shared between teller and audience. The teller creates the story line and delivers it orally to the listeners, who then create mental images and deliver back to the teller reactions to the story line. The reaction, in turn, affects the teller's choice of words, emphasis on plot development, and style of delivery. This co-creative interchange between teller and audience continues for the entirety of the story, thus marking storytelling as an act of communication. As communication, then, storytelling is interactive, immediate, and very personal—a negotiation between *this* teller and *this* audience at *this* time and in *this* place, never to be duplicated in precisely the same way again. It is as a result of this co-creative, interactive, immediate, personal, and one-time nature that storytelling is one of the most powerful forms of art/communication known to humans and also explains why it possesses such great potential as a teaching-learning tool.

Curriculum Implications

Discovering what children learn through storytelling and the role it can play in the K-12 curriculum must begin with basic curriculum theory. In formal educational settings, the teaching-learning process is initiated when teachers identify goals of instruction. A most fundamental goal for schools in our country is that children grow into adults who participate actively and competently in our democracy. While this requires teachers to help children master a multitude of skills and abilities, several specific ones appear to be critical. Children must develop sufficient social skill to be able to cooperate with people of diverse needs and values in order to make our democracy work. They must become competent decision makers and develop mentally to their fullest potential, and they must become literate.

Social Skill Development

For storytelling to be successful, both teller and audience must collaborate to create the story. As such, storytelling provides children with practice in several social skills. Cooperation is required of children as members of the audience. Skill in reading body language, thinking on one's feet, and social negotiation are necessities for children as tellers. Moreover, stories populated by characters from diverse cultural backgrounds help children to develop an understanding of and empathy for people unlike themselves as well as to identify their own unique place in human history. These same stories provide children with archetypal social problem-solving situations, but because the role of all participants in storytelling is an active one, each storytelling event provides both teller and audience with active practice in problem solving.

Mental Development

Problem solving involves higher-level thinking. The notion that thinking

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is a hierarchical taxonomy of mental skills has received increased attention by curriculum theorists (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Teachers are now being urged to design classroom activities that enable children to engage in thinking at all levels but particularly at the highest levels, because thinking at any level includes thinking at all levels beneath it. (Bloom ranks from highest to lowest the following types of thinking: evaluative, synthetic, analytical, applicative, comprehension, and memory.) Clearly, storytelling involves thinking at the highest levels. Synthetic (or creative) thinking is inherent in the storytelling process itself whereas evaluative thinking occurs vicariously as teller and audience co-create solutions to the problems of the characters in the story.

Moreover, storytelling provides exercise for the right as well as the left hemispheres of each child's brain but does so in such a way that the two must work in concert with each other. The left, or logical, side provides the narrative structure or framework for the story while, at the same time, the right, more creative, side generates the imaginative story content being visualized and co-created by the teller and the audience. Storytelling, then, is consistent with recent mandates to engage children in whole-brain education.

Literacy Development

Perhaps the most critical intellectual challenge facing school children is to become literate, and, arguably, the most important responsibility facing teachers is to help children develop skill in reading and writing. Currently, literacy education is grounded in language acquisition theory and a rather interesting set of observations involving the success rate of children learning to communicate aurally/orally in a language vs. learning to communicate via the printed medium. (For an overview of this theory and these observations, see Cambourne, 1986.)

Almost all children learn to speak a language with reasonable fluency by the time they are five years of age. By contrast, significant numbers of children fail to learn to read and write by the time they are chronologically eligible to graduate from high school. This anomaly has intrigued researchers for some years now and has led to investigation and experimentation to attempt to solve the mystery. Adding to the perplexity of the mystery is the discovery by researchers that the mental processes involved in reading and writing are precisely the same as those involved in listening and speaking. If this is true, how is it, then, that so many children fail to learn to read and write by age 18 when they were so successful at learning to listen and speak by age 5 (particularly since 12 years of intensive instruction is involved in the former while little if any formal instruction is involved in the latter)?

Cambourne's Theory

Currently, some theorists (Cambourne included) suggest that this discrepancy is the result of significant differences between the way in which children learn to listen/speak and the way in which they are taught to read/write. Cambourne's research and theorizing has led him to conclude that, in order for formal literacy programs to approach the success rate extant in basic language acquisition, the conditions under which children typically learn to read and write must be replaced by the diametrically opposite conditions that exist when the preschool child is successfully learning to speak.

Children must be *immersed* in and actively *engaged* in the medium they are to learn. The *expectation* that they will master the medium must be unequivocal by the learner but most especially by the mentors (parents and teachers). This expectation is realized only if the communication taking place is perceived by the learner to be *meaningful* and is reinforced by mentors who *demonstrate* for the novice what constitutes mature use of the medium as both mentor and novice engage in *mutual exchanges* with each other. However, the *responsibility* for mastering the medium is clearly understood to be the sole province of the learner.

By comparison, how frequently is it the case in our schools that children are engaged in reading/writing activities over which they have no control—activities they perceive as meaningless either because the assignments are dictated to them or are ones in which they have no vested interest? How often are reading and writing taught as isolated subjects or in a piecemeal fashion having little or no relevance to the real world of the child? How frequently do some teachers, either overtly or subtly, communicate to children that mastery of reading and writing is not expected and, sadly, how often do children come to believe in that judgment even in the earliest grades?

The Role of Storytelling

Storytelling must not be viewed as a cure-all for what ails literacy programs in school. Indeed, it is only one among many strategies that can be employed to help children become competent and confident readers and writers. Yet it is an extremely potent one. Its power emanates from its inherent nature as an interactive, immediate, co-creative, personal, and one-time means of communication and from its consistency with the conditions for linguistic success espoused by Cambourne.

Clearly, participation by children in storytelling, either as a member of the audience or as the teller, involves *immersion* and *active engagement* in a meaningful language experience. *Responsibility* for the success of a storytelling session is dependent upon the children who participate (whether they are telling the story or listening to it) and happens only as a result of *mutual exchanges* between the teller and audience where a storytelling mentor (the teller) *demonstrates* competent storytelling technique. Moreover, the *expectation for success* by the audience, as well as by the teller, is great.

But there is more to be said about the connection between storytelling and literacy. Goodman (1970) has suggested that reading (and, by implication, writing) is a creative-predictive process involving a person's use of his or her background knowledge to make educated guesses as to what is ahead in a line of print. Having sufficient knowledge about the world in general, about the nature of print and printed language, and about the specific type of material to be read/written is critical when recreating the text during reading or creating it during writing. Not only does storytelling provide children with an abundance of relevant background knowledge, it also provides them with practice in the very same creative process that literate people engage in when

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reading and writing. (For a fuller explanation of this phenomenon see Roney, 1984 & 1989.) And because the storytelling experience is so intimate and personal (much more so than is the case when children listen to someone read stories aloud), its impact on children is that much more significant.

In essence, then, employing storytelling in the classroom on a regular basis is a sound teaching/learning strategy, because, as an art form and means of communication, it builds on the children's preschool strengths and oral language expertise to help them successfully develop social, intellectual, and linguistic competences. SW

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